

MEMORABLE ACCIDENTS!



As I remember things. New Mk2 Jaguars coming off the line in the 1960's

A while ago, I returned to Jaguar Cars in Coventry where I had spent the first five years of my career as a Commercial Apprentice (Intern) after leaving school - and enjoyed a factory tour.

What a change!

It was eerily quiet in comparison to the early sixties when the cacophony of noise from compressed air tools, frantic hammering, blaring radios and the endless announcements on the public address system, almost deafened you the moment you stepped inside this cavernous plant. The combination smell of rubber, upholstery glue and new paint hung stiffly on the air and was so much a part of the

building structure, you felt as though you could almost lean on it!

No longer.

No air wrenches, no hammers, no radios, no PA system. Just a quiet efficiency with the 'operatives' on the assembly tracks busying themselves with very up-market variations of cordless drills and a belt full of rechargeable power packs.

And the cleanliness! Good heavens, you could do brain surgery in there without fear of infection.

It's this Health and Safety at Work thing that's precipitated the change - and that set me to thinking about times past and making comparisons between 'then' and 'now.'

My thoughts were simultaneously in the Standard-Triumph Service Departments in Coventry and London respectively - and the oaths and profanities uttered by Alf Goslett when his fingers got mixed up in the fan blades of a fast-revving Standard (Triumph) Ten. I felt sympathy for poor old Alf at that time - because it must have hurt - and yes, my heart went out to him in his distress when a few moments later the badly propped bonnet fell on his head! All you could see was Alf's rear end and legs in much the same stance as though he was being swallowed by a hungry alligator. His cries for help went unheeded for a while, because the bloke with his foot on the accelerator inside the car, was still holding it at about 4000rpm and trying to find Radio Luxembourg on the car's radio!



Standard-Triumph's London Service Division

When Alf was finally rescued, the expletives went on for a very long time - and if my memory serves me correctly, he didn't repeat himself once.

Then there was Amos, a most likeable Jamaican, who had an epileptic fit and drove a brand spanking new Triumph 2.5PI estate car straight through the wall of the London Service Division's car wash. What made things a little delicate in the explanation of things, was that the car's new owner just happened to be on hand at the time - and he'd been waiting for over a year to take delivery.

No, he hadn't been in the waiting

room at Western Avenue for this period, but the car he had chosen - and ordered, had a priority for export in those days and the Home Market cars were strictly rationed.

On another occasion in Coventry, there was the instance of another Triumph 2000 Estate Car that had had its rear half converted into a hearse for funerals. On that particular day, a former colleague extolled the virtues of this very unique body conversion to a small audience of perversely humoured individuals - and in the process, was seen to be gently pushing the tailgate up and down. Each time it moved, there was a grating sound from the hinges and then he discovered the tailgate release catch on the rear deck wasn't to his liking. At least, he *said* it wasn't to his liking - but I think it was working fine.

Spying a large dustsheet covering a car destined for the Earls Court motor show later that month, he ripped it off the car and turning to a colleague said, "*Ere - get this round yerself 'n get in there*" - pointing to the 'cargo' area where coffins go when there's a long distance trip to do with someone who has passed over. You see, we have a tradition in this country that if the coffin and flowers are visible to on-lookers, the car is speed limited to up to 30mph. If the distance to the deceased's burial or cremation is a longer distance, stowing the deceased and their flowers in the lower area where they can't be seen, allows the hearse to travel at up to the national speed limit of 70mph, road conditions permitting.

I digress.

Anyway, the colleague did as he was bid.

Ray then looked around the shop and noticed someone adjusting a doorlock.

"*NOBBAY?!!!!*" he yelled.

Nobby looked over his shoulder - but I don't think could really see anything. He wore glasses that looked like inverted goldfish bowls and was popularly alleged to be three porky scratchings short of a full packet.

"*Nobby, come over 'ere, mate. Got an emergency job for yer. It's this 'inge. It creaks when yer lift the tailgate up and down - and the rear lock's none too secure.*"

Nobby peered through his fish eye lenses.

"*Looks alright to me.*"

"*Nah, mate - it's knackered. Better change it - but before yer do, get yer 'ead right in an' make sure the pawl's not binding on the peg.*"

Nobby did as he was told - and his own head came very close to the 'corpse' in the dust sheet.

The 'corpse' twitched and then it made a sound.

"*Waaa -ah, Waaa-ah*" - and then it made to move into an upright position.

Nobby turned to run - but fainted instead.

That was the first time I ever saw first aid being administered in the form of a wet kerosene brush used for degreasing, being slapped around a man's face to bring him back to consciousness - and a world that most certainly was not ethereal and was visibly devoid of angelic hosts singing in the heavens.

But there was worse when a racing spec TR4 returned from road test. I'm not too sure what happened to the driver, although some said it was a heart attack. Whatever the cause, the car swung through the outer roller shutter door and seemingly had the accelerator floored. With tyres yelping on the sealed concrete floor, people leapt like lemmings for cover and with the engine screaming in first gear, the TR assumed the role of a cue ball in a game of Pool. In its progress, it gathered considerable speed and immediately disposed of two Heralds, a Spitfire and a GT6. The GT6 just happened at the time to be minus both its front and rear axle assemblies and belly-flopped to the floor with a resounding crash! The TR's progress was finally arrested by the longitudinal collapsibility of an early Standard Atlas van that obligingly crumpled like a plastic bottle full of boiling water. In its death throes and perhaps as a final flourish, the Atlas reluctantly dropped both sliding cab doors like a dying swan - for probably not the first time in its life. Atlas cab doors had a disconcerting habit of coming off their runners without any prior warning.

Happily, the TR driver lived - but the Heralds, Spitfire and GT6 didn't.

They were all write-offs - as was the TR.

In the intense silence for those few precious seconds as a headlamp rim stopped its wild cavortings to adopt a spinning wobble on the floor - and before the cheering started, a distant voice was heard addressing the driver of the TR.

*"Well, Charlie, my old son - something tells me it's just not your lucky day" to which a response was, "*****r Charlie! I've just kicked over my afternoon tea 'n trod on the last piece of the wife's jam tart. I'm partial to a piece of tart with my tea, this time of day – but look at it now!"*



Standard-Triumph's only company owned showroom in London's West End. The red box shows its width and location.

Perhaps the most memorable incident that comes to mind was the window to Standard-Triumph's only company owned showroom, situated in the most affluent district of London, known as Mayfair.

No ordinary mortal can easily afford to live in Mayfair unless they possess a disposable income similar to that of Elon Musk or an oil-soaked Arab, so the whole area reeks of both actual and perceived prestige. The

showroom itself had been Standard-Triumph's **"Window on the World"** for the simple fact that the general public were guaranteed the opportunity of seeing one of every model currently in production and all the colour and trim combinations as well.

Interesting too, were the showroom windows that looked out on to Berkeley Square.

They were absolutely unique in that the top and bottom halves were concave in shape to about eighty degrees and these huge pieces of thick, tempered glass ran horizontally the full width of the showroom that in itself was about 100 feet wide. Outside and along the centre-line between the upper and lower halves of glass, was a polished bronze handrail which meant any spectator could lean comfortably forwards being supported by the rail without risk of banging their nose or forehead on the window. These massive pieces of glass were only anchored to the walls at either end and the weight of the top piece bore significantly on the lower one which, because of its extra thickness, could bear the weight of its lighter, upper partner. However, that additional strength did not allow for additional localised 'stress' impositions and this was proved when, one day, as the showroom was being emptied for a full changeover of display cars, one of the cars being removed, was accidentally reversed into the centre of the lower window. The explosive noise of this panel succumbing to the impact and instantly shattering into squillions of tiny pieces of tempered glass, meant the long upper panel could not sustain its own weight – and it collapsed too!

The event – and a picture of its immediate aftermath taken by someone with a camera to hand, made it to the front page of the London Evening Standard newspaper. That in itself was sufficiently embarrassing, but the picture also included an image of British Leyland's CEO, Lord Donald Stokes, remonstrating with the showroom manager. His Nibs had arrived from his office on the sixth floor above us - with some VIP's, no more than five minutes after the event and I so well recall his words being uttered as the shutter button was pressed, *"what the hell do you mean, Hennessey when you say you weren't expecting it and it must have been an accident? Who on earth would actually plan to drive anything through a showroom window? I want a full report on my desk by 9.0am tomorrow morning explaining the circumstances, that the person who did it has been sacked and when you expect to have a new showroom window fully installed!"*

I have no idea how much it cost the insurance company to replace those windows, but it was certainly done rather faster than anyone could reasonably imagine. The driver of the offending car was employed by the delivery company, so not on Standard-Triumph payroll –

but he was immediately sacked from his job. Within twenty-four hours, the unions in Coventry at Jaguar, Morris Engines, Alfred Herbert Machine Tools, Coventry Gauge & Tool, Massey Ferguson, Humber, Hillman, Sunbeam and Standard-Triumph, all downed tools and went on strike in sympathy for what they claimed was the '*unreasonable victimisation of a Shop Steward*' (which function the driver performed in his own trade union) and all the companies involved lost ten days of production as a result.

Those lost production cost impacts ran into hundreds of millions of pounds, so you could say the substantial cost to an insurance company in replacing just two halves of one showroom window, paled to insignificance when compared to the zero output from all those affected firms – and just because of two busted pieces of showroom window!

I suppose the moral here, is if you're going to make a mistake, make sure it's a big one!

I'm inclined to think that particular driver would have found it very difficult to have found any alternative opportunity for making an even larger mistake than he did.